

I BELIEVE IN THE CHURCH

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As editor of **Ministry Today** I am always keen to encourage working ministers to write short practical articles reflecting on some aspect of their ministry. So as a working minister myself, I thought I would set an example by contributing a piece which arises directly out of my present ministry. Currently I am serving a church where many of the members have a very individualistic approach to the Christian faith. To counter that tendency I recently wrote the following as part of my report for our "AGM". What's more, recognising that annual reports are not read for the most part, I have decided to preach a series of sermons this autumn entitled: "I believe in the church". The sermon texts are included in brackets. Hopefully there will arise a deeper understanding of what it means to be church! Inevitably this sermon series is geared to a particular local church within a particular church tradition. However, in offering this piece to *Ministry Today* I trust that it will have some interest to readers in general.

I believe in the church. Indeed, at the heart of my calling to be your minister is a passion to enable our church to *be* church. I am saddened that in so many places the church is a stumbling block to Christian faith. I want to be a minister of a church whose very life is a powerful testimony to the Gospel.

I believe that the church is the temple of the Spirit (1 Cor 6.19) - and as such it is to be the place where God makes himself known. One of the challenges your ministers face week by week is to lead the worship and preach in such a way that the worship and the preaching prove to be a vehicle for God's Spirit.

I believe that the church is the bride of Christ - and as such is called to be radiant with the beauty of holiness (Eph 5.26). Another of the challenges your ministers face, not only on a Sunday but also in their pastoral work, is to promote that kind of attractive holiness.

I believe that the church is the Body of Christ - and as such is called to be a community where relationships are paramount (1 Cor 12.12). In this respect another of the challenges your ministers face is to promote "body ministry", encouraging all to discover their gifts and to play their part.

I believe in the church as the people of God gathered in one place. My understanding of Scripture is that the church of God is always local (e.g. 1 Cor 1.2) and only by extension universal. The local church is the cutting edge of the Kingdom of God. What a privilege - what a responsibility!

Because I believe in the church, I believe in church membership. Indeed, the New Testament makes it clear that church membership is not an option for those who believe in the Lord Jesus Christ. Commitment to Christ inevitably involves commitment to the people of Christ, and this commitment is expressed through church membership. Because I believe in the local church, commitment to Christ is in the first place expressed through membership of a local church. This has all kinds

of implications. For instance, it means that the level of our commitment to Christ is reflected in the level of our commitment to Christ's people. The degree to which I love the Lord Jesus is the degree to which I love my brothers & sisters (see John 13.34-35). Incidentally, I find it difficult to understand how people can ever think of resigning from church membership (as distinct from transferring to another church). Theologically speaking, to resign is tantamount to giving up on Christ!

Because I believe in the church, I believe in the church meeting (see Acts 15). In the Baptist understanding of the church, the church meeting is the place where we express our commitment to Christ and to one another. The church meeting is not simply the place where we discern the mind of Christ - it is also the place where the Body of Christ comes to expression. From where then did the idea come that the church meeting is in the first place a business meeting?

Because I believe in the church, I believe in church discipline (Matt 18.15-20). The Reformers in general, and our spiritual forebears in particular, taught that for a church to be a church there must be the preaching of the word, the administration of the sacraments, and the exercise of church discipline. A church without discipline is like a body without sinews. It is to our detriment that church discipline has become an abnormal part of the church's life!

Because I believe in the church, I believe in church leadership (Acts 6.1-7). The Scriptures teach that God calls some to serve his church through leading his church forward in mission and ministry. A church without leadership is a church which is going nowhere. Of course leaders are fallible, but with all their warts they are Christ's gift to his church and as such are to be valued - and therefore encouraged. We should therefore not speak dismissively about the 'hierarchy'!

Because I believe in the church, I believe in church growth (Matt 16.13-20). In particular I believe that Jesus wants to build his church here - not just through transfer growth, but above all through conversion growth. I long to see people won for Christ and his church. I long to see God's Spirit touch us all in such a way that we truly become 'contagious Christians'.